

This week in history: August 5-11

5 August 2019

25 years ago: Senate debate on health care begins

On August 9, 1994, a debate began in the US Senate on health care legislation, the main domestic policy initiative of the Clinton administration. Described by the *New York Times* as a discussion of the “last unfinished business of the New Deal,” the debate represented the last gasp of liberalism, too cowardly to make even the slightest criticism of the capitalist profit system.

In spite of all the self-serving and demagogic speeches, with a Democrat in the White House and large Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, no action was forthcoming to provide any guarantee of universal health care coverage for working and middle-class families in the United States.

Representatives from both parties agreed that health care must be based on private profit, serving the financial interests of big business and Wall Street, and not the social needs of the population. Over 40 million people lacked health insurance when the debate began, with millions more cut off from insurance the moment of a diagnosis, threatening the average family with financial ruin, a situation which has continued to worsen ever since.

President Clinton’s own health plan had long been abandoned, with most of the discussion focusing on a measure drafted a week before the debate by Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell. This measure promised a goal of coverage for 95 percent of the population by the year 2000 and failed to win majority support. Even if it had been, it would have permanently excluded tens of millions of people and delayed until much later any requirement that employers pay even a portion of workers’ health insurance costs.

The hysteria whipped up over what the insurance industry, hospitals, drug manufacturers, and their political mouthpieces denounced as “socialized medicine” held a definite political significance. Both parties were moving to the right, with Clinton unable to propose any genuine reform that would establish health care as a basic right, regardless of income, and the Republicans vilifying any suggestion that the “welfare state” should be expanded in any way. The result was a further shift away from placing responsibility for health care on employers or the government, putting the burden instead on the backs of the working class.

50 years ago: Manson group kills eight members of two families in Los Angeles

In the early morning hours of August 9, 1969, members of the cult group headed by Charles Manson broke into the home of a married couple, actress Sharon Tate and director Roman Polanski, and killed Tate, her unborn child and four other adults. Polanski was in Europe working on a film at the time of the murders.

The next night the group would murder two others, Leno and Rosemary LaBianca, in their home. The murders were carried out brutally, with some victims stabbed nearly 50 times.

The “Manson Family,” as it became known, involved Manson’s following of mostly young women who were initially attracted to the groups use of communal living, frequent drug use, and hippie culture. Manson preached a Nazi-style theory of an impending race war that he called “Helter Skelter.” He and his followers believed that after the war had wiped out most of humanity they alone would be left to rule over the world.

After the apocalyptic conflict failed to start on its own, Manson and the family plotted a series of gruesome murders to be pinned on black militants which they believed would spark the war. No individuals were ever directly framed for the murders, but the killers intentionally left symbols and phrases loosely connected to black nationalists at the crime scenes, such as writing “death to pigs” and drawing panther pawprints on the walls in the victims’ blood.

By the time the police had connected the killings to Manson and the other perpetrators, including Charles “Tex” Watson, Leslie Van Houten, Patricia Krenwinkel, and Susan Atkins and issued warrants in December 1969, many of them, including Manson, had already been arrested for other crimes, mainly car theft. At the murder trial all of the accused were sentenced to death, which was later reduced to life in prison after California abolished the death penalty.

75 years ago: Japanese prisoners of war stage mass escape in Australia

On August 5, 1944, over 1,000 Japanese prisoners of war attempted a mass escape from a detention facility in Cowra, a country town 300 kilometers west of Sydney. The action was the biggest escape of POWs in Australia during World War II and was among the largest internationally in the entire conflict.

The Cowra prison camp housed some 4,000 inmates, including Japanese and Italian POWs, and so-called “enemy aliens.” Most of the Japanese troops had been captured in the course of battles over the preceding three years over control of strategically critical islands in the Pacific. The Italian prisoners had been seized in combat operations in North Africa.

The camp also housed Koreans, and Indonesian civilians, who were imprisoned at the request of the colonial Dutch government, which was in the midst of repressing a popular independence movement.

The plan for the mass escape was hatched when Japanese prisoners became aware of a plan to move them to another facility, in the town of Hay, amid warnings to the authorities of possible unrest.

At around 2 a.m. on the morning of August 5, a Japanese prisoner ran towards the camp gates, yelling at its sentries. Shortly after, another sounded a bugle. This was the signal for hundreds of prisoners to charge the camp gates. They reportedly shouted “Banzai” as they climbed the barbed-wire fences, using blankets to protect themselves. The soldiers were allegedly armed with knives and other makeshift weapons.

Some 1,104 prisoners were involved. Around 400 of them succeeded in breaching the prison fence. Over the following days, the Australian government launched a massive manhunt for the escapees, leading to mass bloodshed. Some 231 Japanese soldiers were killed, either by Australian troops or as a result of suicide. Four Australian soldiers died.

In the wake of the incident, the Australian government claimed that the camp adhered to Geneva standards. Right-wing demagogues used the attempted escape to whip up racist and anti-Japanese sentiment.

100 years ago: Germany adopts Weimar Constitution

On August 11, 1919, Germany’s president, Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert, signed a new constitution into law. It established Germany as a democratic republic with universal suffrage for all citizens over the age of 20. The country was still officially called the German Empire (Deutsches Reich), although the Kaiser, Wilhelm II, had abdicated in 1918 after the German defeat in the First World War by the Allies and the November Revolution of that year.

The constitution had been written by a National Assembly, which, in turn, had been elected in January 1919 at the behest of the Council of People’s Deputies that had emerged in the

aftermath of the November Revolution. The council was dominated by representatives of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), which together had suppressed the workers’ revolution and saved German capitalism.

The National Assembly, which met in Weimar and gave its name to the German state between 1919 and 1933, was comprised mostly of Social Democrats. The newly formed Communist Party, whose leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had been murdered with the assistance of the Social Democratic leaders, boycotted the elections to the assembly.

Weimar, the capital of the state of Thuringia, 223 kilometers (140 miles) southwest of Berlin, was chosen as the center for the deliberations of the National Assembly, partly because of its distance from the capital, which was an international center of working-class agitation.

The new constitution granted German citizens the right to assemble peaceably without prior notice to the government, freedom of speech and religion, and the right of women to vote and hold public office. It was, however, an imperialist document, which accepted that the German state could administer colonies.

The constitution was developed to give the semblance, in a bourgeois republic, of genuine democratic rule and to hold off revolutionary struggle by the working class.

The fact that the constitution was little more than parliamentary window-dressing was revealed by the fact that after the Nazis seized power in 1933, Hitler invoked one of its provisions, Article 48, to suspend democratic rights. Further, the constitution remained officially in effect in Germany during the entire Nazi period.



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